

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 325 773

CG 022 927

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TITLE Toward Understanding Stress in Ministers' Families:
An Application of the Double ABCX Model.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the
National Council on Family Relations (52nd, Seattle,
WA, November 9-14, 1990).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference
Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Clergy; Coping; *Family Problems; Models; Resources;
*Stress Management; *Stress Variables; Theological
Education

ABSTRACT

Recent literature indicates that ministers' families face not only the normative developmental stressors of other families, but an additional set of stressors created by the interface between the family and the church systems. Based upon the Double ABCX model of family stress, particular ministers' families will vary in their ability to adapt to stressors based upon a variety of factors including: the particular stressor event; the family resources; the family definition of the stressor; the amount of family crisis resulting from the event, the resources, and the definition; the pile-up of prior strains and current hardships; the resources and support; redefinition of the situation; and coping skills. Implications of this model may be considered at these levels: (1) church leadership may seek to reduce stressors while providing resources to help families; (2) seminary training and continuing educational opportunities for ministers and their spouses can emphasize that stress is a normative part of life and ministerial lifestyle requires a special type of family/occupational coordination; (3) workshops for those currently pastoring churches can emphasize that stress is a normative part of life and provide suggestions for coordinating family and occupational concerns; (4) written materials to minimize stress while maximizing family and occupational effectiveness can be published; and (5) diagnostic tools can be developed for assessing stress and adaptation in ministerial families. (Author/ABL)

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Toward Understanding Stress in Ministers' Families:
An Application of the Double ABCX Model*

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ED325773

CG022927

*Paper presented at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, Seattle, WA (November, 1990)

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An Application of the Double ABCX Model*

Abstract

The paper presents an integration of the existing literature on stress in ministers' families, utilizing the Double ABCX model of family stress (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Based upon the Double ABCX model of family stress, particular ministers' families will vary in their ability to adapt to stressors based upon a variety of factors including: the particular stressor event; the family resources; the family definition of the stressor; the amount of family crisis resulting from the event, the resources and the definition; the pile-up of prior strains and current hardships; the resources and support; redefinition of the situation and coping skills. Within the context of this model, issues specifically related to ministers' families are presented.

An Application of the Double ABCX Model*

Recent literature indicates that ministers' families face not only the normative developmental stressors of other families (McGoldrick & Carter, 1982), but an additional set of stressors created by the interface between the family and the church systems (Lee & Balswick, 1989): This paper is designed to provide an integration of the literature regarding stress and coping in ministers' families within the framework of family stress theory (Boss, 1987; Hill, 1958; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983).

The Double ABCX model of family stress (see Figure 1) proposed that families vary in their ability to adapt to stressors (XX) based upon: the particular stressor event (a); the family resources; (b) the family definition of the stressor (c); the amount of family crisis resulting from the event, the resources and the definition (x); the pile-up of prior strains and current hardships (aA); the resources and support (bB); the redefinition of the situation (cC) and coping skills (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). In the following pages, summaries of issues for ministers' families are described according to each element of the Double ABCX model of family stress.

First, ministers' families face a variety of church, family, and individual stressors (Ostrander, Henry & Hendrix, 1990). These stressors include the normative developmental stressors for individual family members and for the family unit. Further, normative stressors occur due to the relationship between the church and family, resulting in occupational/family lifestyle linkages in ministers' families (Lee & Balswick, 1989). Normative stressors for church, family, and individual stressors among ministers' families are listed in Table 1, under "The Stressor Event". Further, ministers' families vary in their existing resources available to manage stressor events.

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Examples of external and family resources for ministers' families are presented in Table 1 (see "b. Existing Resources"). In addition, variation in how ministers' families define stressor events is expected. Family stress theory proposed that the perceptions and meanings families attribute to stressors influences the degree of disruption a particular stressor creates for a family (Hill, 1958; see Table 1). Finally, the state of balance or imbalance a family experiences based upon the combination of the stressor event, existing resources, the family definition of the situation (x) results during the crisis phase (see Table 1).

As a ministers' family begins to make initial attempts to adjust to a stressor, many times a pile-up of stressors occurs. The pile-up may include attempts to deal with the initial stressor or other developmental tasks for the individuals or family unit (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). See Table 2 for a summary of the church, family, and individual stressors that may result in a pile-up of stress (aA) as ministers' families attempt to manage stressors. In addition, during the adaptation phase, ministers' families call upon existing and new resources for dealing with the stressor. For example, new community or church-related resources may be called upon when family internal strengths are insufficient to manage a particular stressor. Table 2 details the new and existing resources that ministers' families may mobilize during stress (bB, see Table 2). Finally, as a ministers' family passes through the initial response to a stressor event, they may redefine the resources and previous coping attempts in new ways. Thus, the family establishes a redefinition or new perceptions of the stressor event, as indicated by cC on Table 2. Finally, during the adaptation phase, the ministers' family may utilize a variety of coping skills, some effective and some

ineffective, to manage the stressor. A number of coping patterns⁵ utilized by ministers' families are presented in Table 2.

Over time, the combination of the stressor event (aA), the family crisis meeting resource (bB), the definition of the situation (cC), the degree of crisis experienced (x), the pile-up of stressors (aA), the new and existing resources (bB), the redefinition of the situation (cC), and the coping patterns yields an overall effectiveness in the ministerial family response to a stressor (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). The extent to which families effectively deals with a stressor has an impact upon the functioning of individuals within the family, of the family unit, and in the family-community fit (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). McCubbin and Patterson (1983) propose that families vary in their level of adaptation to stress, ranging from bonadaptation (i.e., individual, family, and family-community fit enhanced) to maladaptation (i.e., reduced individual, family, and family-community fit functioning). Consequently, ministers' families may be described as reaching a level of adaptation to stress over time. The level of adaptation has consequences for various family members (i.e., adults, adolescents, and children, see Table 3), for family integrity, and in terms of the family interface with the church. Ministers' families in a state of bonadaptation will experience enhanced development for individual family members, for the family unit, and a strengthened quality of relationship with the church. In contrast ministers' families who have difficulty effectively dealing with the stressors in this lifestyle are at risk for developmental problems within individual family members, for less effective family functioning, and for reduced effectiveness in the church-family interface.

In summary, ministers' families may be expected to vary in their ability to deal with normative individual and family developmental

stressors and with the stressors of the ministerial family lifestyle. The Double ABCX model of family stress provides a basis for examining elements in the process of managing ministerial families' responses to stress. This integration of ideas relating to stress in ministers' families and family stress theory provides a foundation for helping ministers' families to be strengthened, even when faced with stressors. Implications of this model may be considered at several levels:

(1) Church leadership (i.e., denominational leadership, local leaders) may seek to reduce the stressors emerging from policies and procedures within the church system, while providing resources (e.g., counseling or support services) to help ministers' families better manage stress.

(2) Seminary training and continuing educational opportunities for ministers and their spouses can emphasize that stress is a normative part of family life and that the ministerial lifestyle requires a special type of family/occupational coordination that recognizes the stressors and seeks to maximize family and ministerial effectiveness.

(3) Workshops with ministers' families currently pastoring churches can also emphasize that stress is a normative part of family life and give suggestions for coordinating family and occupational concerns in a way that recognizes the stressors and seeks to increase family and ministerial effectiveness.

(4) Written materials available to ministers and their spouses covering normative aspects of stress, and written matter containing suggestions or helps in organizing the family and occupation in a way that minimizes this stress, while maximizing family and occupational effectiveness, can be published. Written material may be an

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especially effective media for aiding ministerial families who feel
unable to attend counseling sessions and/or workshops.

(5) Diagnostic tools can be developed for assessing stress and
adaptation in ministerial families and their individual family
members, so that when counseling is sought, appropriate measures will
be used with these families.

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Table 1

Pre-Crisis and Crisis Phases of the Double ABCX Model of Family Stress as Applied to Ministers' Families

a. The Stressor Event

Church stressors

1. Boundary ambiguity
2. Work schedule/timing issues
3. Mobility
4. Financial Strain

Family stressors

1. Family life cycle stage
2. Marital dyad relationship
3. Parent-child relationships
4. Parent-adolescent relationship
5. Extended family relationships

Individual stressors

1. Adult development issues
2. Child development issues
3. Adolescent development issues
4. Physical changes
5. Losses:
 - health
 - job (church or other)
 - death in family
 - divorce
 - member runs away
6. Alcohol/drug abuse
7. Child enters/leaves school
8. Member gets new job

b. Existing Resources

External Resources

1. Congregational Support
2. Denominational Support
3. Community Support/Resources (Counseling, financial)
4. Social Support networks

Family Resources

1. Extended family
2. Family flexibility
3. Family sense of humor
4. Family loyalty, commitment to each other
5. Family caring
6. Family sense of purpose in life
7. Family commitment to ministry
8. Financial assets
9. Open communication
10. Family strengths

c. Perception of stressor (a event)

1. Positive definition
2. Negative definition

Crisis (X)

The degree of imbalance a family experiences based on the stressor, level of resources and definition interacting

Table 2

Post-Crisis and Adaptation Phases of the Double ABCX Model of Family Stress as Applied to Ministers' Families

**aA. Pile-Up of Stressors, Strains, and Hardships
Church Pile-Up**

Exhaustion from too much "positive stress"
Excessive congregational expectations

Lack of privacy

Insecurity—who is in the family and who is not?

Scapegoating family problems onto the Church system

Scapegoating church problems onto the ministerial family

Long hours of ministerial-parent absence

Ministerial commitments conflict with adolescent/child's activities (sports, plays, etc.)

Disrupted eating/sleeping from odd-houred calls/emergencies with the church

Mobility issues:

Loss of the familiar

Adjustment to a new community

- 1.) New social contacts to be made
- 2.) New ministerial association

3.) Unknown community expectations
Adjustment to a new home

Adjustment to a new school

- 1.) Peer group changes

- 2.) Academic changes

Family secrets about family's actual financial situation

Out-of-pocket business expenses that are not reimbursed

Lobbying for a pay raise and its social implications in the church system

Embarrassment due to large income-gossip about this income

Coping Patterns

Family-Church Coping

Confrontation of family church member

Avoidance/denial used to address problems

Identify more with the ministry

Identify more with the family

Develop an identity separate from ministry

Become more flexible

Blame the church

Blame the family

Announce a definite work schedule & days off

The grieving process

Take vacations

Redefine church people as part of the family

Develop social support in church

The grieving process

Access external sources of social support

Join a support group

Meet with denominational leadership

Trust in God

Have faith

Keeping up the pastoral image
Feelings of being victimized

Family Pile-up

Parent role overload-less access
to the adolescent/child

Discipline/guidance concerns
Parental expectations of children
Parental hypocrisy seen in a
negative light by children
Marital quality impacts
Marital conflict effects-inability
to admit to marital problems or
anger or negative emotions

Parental separation/divorce effects

Sibling relationship effects
Parent-child relationship effects:
i.e., if ministerial parent
abdicates parental responsibilities,
other parent feels overloaded
Jealousy, breakdown in trust
Inability to get marriage/family
counseling

Carry over of stress from one
family member to another

Communication breakdowns

Birth of a child, or
other developmental stage
stage issues close to a move
or other major stressors

Excessive extended family
expectations

Developmental milestones from
several family members coincide
(i.e., adolescent identity
development with parents' midlife
developmental tasks)

Individual Pile-up

Minister's stress carryover from
work (female ministers may face
stressors males do not)
Stress carryover from nonministerial
spouse's job
Children's stress carryover from
school
Child's feelings of ambivalence
due to entering new school
Adolescent's stress carryover from
school/work

Family coping skills

Make plans to
improve family
devotions
Family uses denial/
avoidance tactics
Confrontation of
family
Ask for counseling
Access social
support and
help from church
members
Look for parenting
help from
extended family
Family abuse
Yelling
Try to talk problems
Hire help
Trust in God
Have faith
Defining the
ministerial
family lifestyle
Defining church
people as the
"enemy" to be
overcome
Defining family as a
priority
Talking with
extended family
about realities of
ministerial
lifestyle

Accepting change as
inevitable
Develop family
social competence

Individual Coping Skills

Participate actively in
a move
Alcohol/drugs used
Denial/avoidance
Develop high self esteem
Make plans to read Bible/
pray more
Prayer
Trust in God
Having faith
Acting out

Worry/guilt/anxiety
 Self image concerns
 Consequences of feeling alienated/
 isolated
 Identity problems may result in
 acting out, or high conformity
 and resultant problems
 Alcohol/drug abuse
 Side-effects of mental/emotional/
 physical problems

Ruining away
 Take a self-improvement course
 Stress reduction activities
 Confront a family member
 Grieving process
 Individual involvement in
 a move
 Angry outbursts/cry
 Assess one's own strengths &
 weaknesses
 Giving up
 Access social support
 Seek counseling
 Talk to school counselor
 Talk to a teacher
 Talk to parents/spouse

bb. Existing and New Resources

1. Any resources used before
that are not depleted
2. New resources such as new
knowledge of a community
resource
3. Newly acquired skills of the
family and its members
4. A better home, more privacy,
better pay, etc.

**cc. Definition of pile-up,
resources, and coping
attempts**

1. Positive definition
2. Negative definition

Table 3

Adaptation Phases of the Double ABCX Model of Family Stress as Applied to Ministers' Families

Bonadaptation

Individual integrity enhanced:

Adult:

Healthy level of social competence/ability of the adult to get along in their social environment
 High level of self esteem
 Balanced levels of conformity/autonomy

Healthy sense of identity
 Good physical health
 Good mental health
 Good emotional health
 Has a sense of purpose in life
 Flexibility sufficient to allow an adaptable outlook on life

Bible reading and prayer life compatible with adult's needs
 Behaviors consistent with beliefs

Ability to resolve individual stressors as they arise
 Resolving developmental issues in a timely fashion
 Ability to access social support

Having a sense of belonging

Maladaptation

Individual integrity threatened Adult

Lack of social competence

Low self esteem
 Imbalance in conformity/autonomy

Identify confusion
 Failing health
 Mental problems
 Emotional problems
 Lacking purpose
 Rigidity or excess flexibility preventing adaptation

Devotional life not meeting needs

Inconsistent convictions and actions)

Even small stressors not overcome

Developmental issues not met adequately

Inability to access social support

Alienation/loneliness over long periods of time

Adolescent

Healthy level of social competence/ability of youth to get along in social environment
 Active in a peer group
 Gradually increasing levels of autonomy and decreasing levels conformity
 Increasing positive sense of level of identity
 High self esteem
 Good physical health
 Good mental health
 Good emotional health
 Has a sense of purpose in life
 Bible reading and prayer life meeting individual needs

 Enough individual flexibility to ensure an adaptable outlook on life
 Resolving developmental issues in a timely fashion

 Having a sense of belonging

 Ability to access social support
 Ability to resolve individual adolescent stressors when they arise

Child

High child social competence/ability of child to get along in their social environment

 Functioning at their individual level in school
 Good physical health
 Good mental health
 Good emotional health
 Progressing through developmental stages in a timely fashion

 Having a sense of belonging

 Presence of a peer group
 Ability to resolve individual child stressors when they arise
 Having a gradually decreasing sense of dependence upon parents but still well-tied to parents

Difficult social relations

Lack of friends
 Inappropriate levels of conformity/autonomy
 Identity confusion

Low self esteem
 Failing health
 Mental problems
 Emotional problems
 Lack of purpose
 Bible reading and Not meeting individual needs
 Not enough/too much flexibility

Failure to address developmental issues
 Alienation/loneliness over long periods of time
 Lack of social support
 Inability to resolve even minor stressors

Lack of social competence-evidence of not adapting to social environment
 School problems

Failing health
 Mental problems
 Emotional problems
 Failure to progress in an adequate manner through developmental stages
 Alienation/loneliness over long periods of time
 Lack of friends
 Inability to resolve

Increased dependence/premature separation from parental figures

Family integrity enhanced

Adequate levels of family social competence/ability of family to function as a family in its social environment

Levels of flexibility that give the family the ability to adapt to change

High level of family regenerativity

A relationship with the church community (family-church fit) that is acceptable to the family

A satisfactory sense of boundaries between family and church (i.e., a sense of family identity separate from the church, as well as a part of the church)

A relationship with the broader community (family-community fit) that is acceptable to the family

Family Bible reading and prayer compatible with family expectations

Healthy interaction between family members

High levels of positive communication between family members

High sense of family loyalty, caring, trust in family

A balance between church commitments and family commitments that is satisfactory for all involved

Family unable to function adequately in their social environment

Too much/not enough flexibility to adapt to changes

Low levels

Family-church fit is not acceptable

Unclear boundaries

Family identity poor or missing

Uncomfortable relationship with the Community

Unsatisfactory Bible reading and prayer time for the family

Interactions among family members that may be harmful to the family or

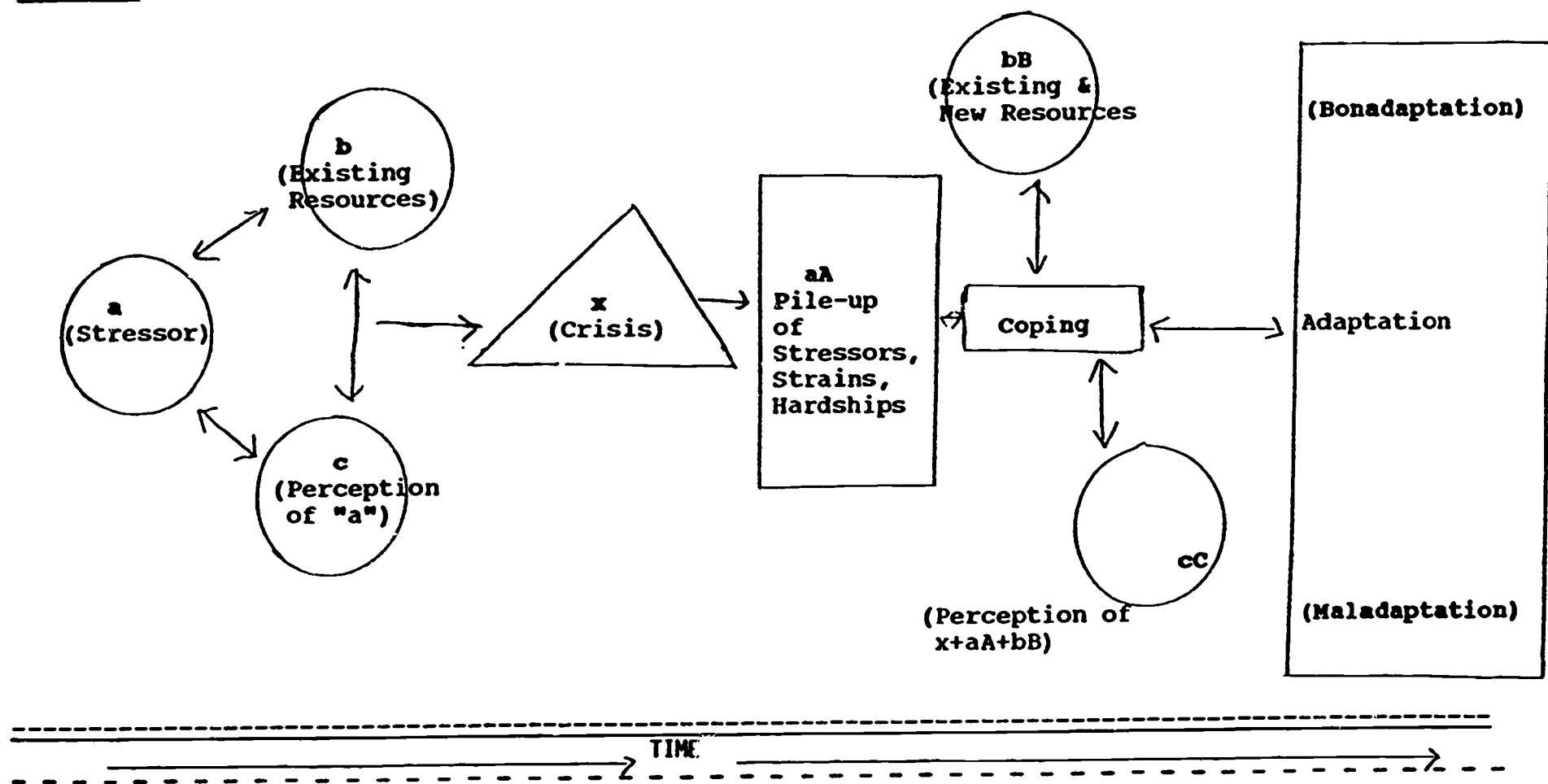
individual family members

Low communication levels, or high levels of negative

Lack of family loyalty, caring, trust

Imbalance between church and family commitments

Figure 1. The Double ABCX Model: A theoretical perspective on stress in ministers' families.



*Adapted from McCubbin, H. & Patterson, J. (1983). The family stress process: The double ABCX model of adjustment and adaptation. Marriage and Family Review, 6, 7-37.